

Scholars for Justice

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At a time when higher education is more expensive than ever and the value of the liberal arts has been called into question, it might seem paradoxical to argue that honors—generally offering its students’ large merit scholarships and small classes—is an asset to the university. However, the prestige of a university benefits both from the high test scores and GPAs of honors students at admission and from the national scholarships or professional and graduate school acceptances awarded them upon their graduation. In addition, universities benefit financially from the high retention rate of honors students. For example, at Loyola, the six-year graduation rate is almost 30% higher for honors students than for the general population. Moreover, not just affluent students are being retained. A distinguishing feature of Loyola’s honors program is that, although over 24% of our honors students are the first in their families to attend college, first-generation status is not a factor in graduation rates, probably because the benefits of holistic attention that are standard features of honors—small class sizes, sustained relationships with advisors and

professors, themed living, community engagement—are also important factors in improving retention for first-generation students.

From my perspective as the president of a Catholic, Jesuit institution, as a professor in the Loyola University Honors Program (I teach biomedical ethics each year), and as a Jesuit priest, the value of our honors program lies in its mission: to provide an enriching academic environment that fosters a strong sense of community and challenges our student to use their gifts to become men and women for and with others.

We call our Loyola honors students “scholars for justice in the heart of New Orleans.” Through both their coursework and their engagement activities, they seek to address some of the biggest challenges facing our community: lack of access to quality education; hunger; hyperincarceration; gun violence. However central these issues are to our city, they are equally important beyond the confines of Louisiana. The role of honors, first and foremost, is to encourage students to think critically and creatively and then to discern how to transform their thoughts into action and justice.

A central value in Ignatian education is “finding God in all things.” At the 2000 Justice Conference at Santa Clara University, Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, SJ, Superior General of the Society of Jesus, gave the keynote speech, titled “The Service of Faith and the Promotion of Justice in American Jesuit Higher Education.” He said, “Students, in the course of their formation, must let the gritty reality of this world into their lives, so they can learn to feel it, think about it critically, respond to its suffering and engage it constructively.” Honors students have an obligation to use their intellectual, emotional, and other gifts to develop an understanding of the world in its complexities and its beauty. We must graduate these students with the ability to listen to and engage with divergent opinions, to effect workable compromises and solutions, and with a moral compass tuned to the ethical implications of actions.

We must fight rigorously, as well, to oppose those who would measure the value of education based on a graduate’s salary. At Loyola, we are especially proud of our many honors alumni participating in programs such as the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, Teach for America or Teach NOLA, Americorps or the Peace Corps. While we rightly laud our students’ graduate school acceptances and academic awards, we are equally proud of the many who receive awards for leadership, community engagement, and service.

In addition to the NCHC’s hallmark “Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program,” the Honors Consortium of the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities (AJCU) has articulated the “Essential

Characteristics of a Jesuit Honors Program” <<http://academicaffairs.loyno.edu/honors/essential-characteristics-jesuit-honors-program>>. For example, we encourage the development of not only a distinct honors community but one where all members of the community care for each other holistically and where “personal and intellectual relationships will reinforce each other as the community’s diverse members grow in friendship and compassion. Such a community will also be distinguished by its inclusion of and respect for individuals from a variety of backgrounds and points of view.” We explicitly encourage the development of compassion along with wisdom, and we maintain goals of forming well-educated men and women of intellectual depth who embody a solidarity with the poor and vulnerable, a firm commitment to a faith that does justice, and a life of servant leadership with and for others.

The key to the success of our—and, indeed, any—honors program is that we strive to be a community of relationships rather than a checklist of activities and experiences. It is my great privilege to be in community with these outstanding individuals.

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